

PENNINGTON COURT:
A CHAPTER IN THE HISTORY
OF
NEWARK, NEW JERSEY
1939 - 1960

MATERIAL COMPILED BY:
ELSIE REED EATMAN
WALTER D. CHAMBERS

WRITTEN BY:
WALTER D. CHAMBERS

complete Report available from:
IRONBOUND Community Corporation

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A HISTORY OF PENNINGTON COURT, 1939 - 1960

NEWARK, NEW JERSEY

INTRODUCTION

This brief history of Pennington Court, the first public housing project in New Jersey, was compiled and written in connection with the reunion of the early families, friends and neighbors who lived in and around the Court during the 1940 - 1960 years. Pennington Court is located in the Ironbound or Down-neck section of Newark, a unique community throughout its history.

The special and memorable experiences of life in Pennington Court led a group of the first tenants to conceive and implement the idea of a neighborhood reunion scheduled for October 10, 1982. This reunion involves those people who lived in the "Negro" unit of Pennington Court. Most of these families still live in New Jersey, many in Essex County. Four of the original tenants still live in the Court. The close family and personal ties over the years made it possible to contact nearly one hundred people plus others who expressed an interest in the Reunion.

A review of this history will show why the first effort at low-cost public housing was so successful - The People. Further it will show why it was easy to interest so many in this Reunion - The People. Finally it will tell why we are proud to be alumni of Pennington Court.

We commend this history to you as a positive image of public housing in the City of Newark.

THE PENNINGTON COURT REUNION PLANNING COMMITTEE

Gloria Simmons Kingston	Walter Chambers
Elsie Reed Eatman	Hayes Cooper
John Caldwell	Leroy Minatee
Edward Seagraves	

Scott's Manor
Orange, New Jersey

October 10, 1982

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank the following persons and sources for their assistance and cooperation in compiling materials for this history of Pennington Court:

Daniel W. Blue, Jr.
Assistant Executive Director
Newark Redevelopment and Housing Authority

Charles F. Cummings
Supervising Librarian, New Jersey Division
Free Public Library, Newark, New Jersey

Members, Pennington Court Reunion Planning Committee

Clippings, Newark Evening News

Newark: A Chronological & Documentary History
Compiled and Edited by Arnold S. Rice
Oceana Publications, Inc., 1977
Dobbs Ferry, New York

A Short Chronology of America History, 1492 - 1950
by Irving S. and Nell M. Kull
Rutgers University Press, 1952
New Brunswick, New Jersey

The Encyclopedia of American Facts and Dates
Edited by Gorton Carruth and Associates
Fourth Edition - 1966
Thomas Y. Crowell Company, New York

The Negro Almanac, New Revised Edition
Compiled and Edited by Harry A. Ploski, Ph. D.
and Ernest Kaiser
The Bellwether Company 1971
New York, New York

A HISTORY OF PENNINGTON COURT, 1939 - 1940

NEWARK, NEW JERSEY

BACKGROUND

Pennington Court is the first low-cost housing project in New Jersey developed by the Newark Housing Authority in 1939. It was built on property bounded by Pennington, Dawson, South and Pacific Streets. The Authority acquired the land, 132,139 square feet, including a baseball field called Pacific Oval, for a price of \$52,000.

Some 13 properties were acquired to clear the tract and 114 families were relocated. There was some early objection to the project from local residents.

All these barriers were cleared by May 1939 when ground-breaking ceremonies were held with New Jersey Governor Moore, Newark Mayor Ellenstein, Housing Authority Chairman Charles P. Gillen and representatives of the United States Housing Authority participating.

The general construction contract was awarded to the Fatzler Company, Inc. with a low bid of \$692,000. The project consists of four three-story high red brick buildings, shaped like three sides of a square and placed at the corners of the site. The project was designed to accommodate 236 families in 3½, 4½, 5½ room apartments at an overall expense of 1.4 million dollars, which included land acquisition, architects' fees, construction and other costs.

The name of the project was recommended by a committee of civic leaders, including Harold A. Lett, an authority member, and announced at the ground-breaking ceremonies. The name was taken from Captain William Stanford Pennington, who achieved fame in civil and military life during the Revolutionary era. Captain Pennington served as Governor of New Jersey from 1813 - 1815. The name Pennington Court also was considered appropriate by the committee because the housing development is flanked on one side by Pennington Street.

Upon completion of construction in January 1940, a model apartment was set up under the direction of the state WPA arts and crafts project. By March some 15,000 people visited the model apartment.

The first sixteen families moved into Pennington Court on February 24, 1940. This group included twelve white families and four Negro families, the same ratio as the distribution of units. Of the four units in Pennington Court, three were to be solely white and one unit, buildings #169-183, to be occupied by Negroes. In all, the development housed 236 families of which 60 were Negro. John and Catherine Caldwell were the first Negroes to move into the Court. The first manager was Ellsworth J. Sweeney.

TENANT ELIGIBILITY AND SELECTION

The Newark Housing Authority set forth the following standards for occupancy in Pennington Court:

Rents-

Three room apartments, \$20.50 a month; three and one half, \$20.75; four and one half \$21.25; five and one half, \$21.75. Rents included heat, gas, electricity and hot water.

Room Occupancy-

Three and three and one half room apartments, two to three persons with one bedroom; four and one half room apartments, three to five persons with two bedrooms and five and one half rooms, four to seven persons with three bedrooms. All units were equipped with refrigerator and gas stove.

Local Maximum Income-

Must not exceed the following according to family size:

Two Persons - \$18.45 a week, \$80 a month or \$960 a year.

Three Persons - \$20.10 a week, \$87.08 a month or \$1,045 a year.

Four Persons - \$21.06 a week, \$91.25 a month or \$1,095 a year.

Five Persons - \$22.12 a week, \$95.83 a month or \$1,150 a year.

Six to Seven

Persons - \$24.04 a week, \$104.17 a month or \$1,250 a year.

Housing Need-

Applicant must demonstrate a real need, such as living in substandard dwelling, in overcrowded circumstances or under conditions dangerous to health, safety or morals.

Residence-

One year in the city.

Preference-

Former site residents, families with children and nearness to place of employment.

Public Assistance-

Families who receive public assistance will be accepted up to 15 percent of a project. This includes city relief, WPA, old age pension, children's guardians and similar cases.

Pennington Court was dedicated at a special ceremony on April 27, 1940. At the exercises the project was described as an example of America, the melting pot. Neil J. Convery, executive director of the Newark Housing Authority stated:

"The housing program is truly American. Twenty-three nationalities and two races (white and Negro) are living in friendly neighborliness in a government-aided project."

A Housing Authority report in April 1940 showed 288 adult tenants were of foreign origin. It disclosed 346 adult tenants were born in the United States, 152 of them in Newark.

Chief among foreign nationalities were Italian with 117; Irish 33; Jewish 26 and Polish and German, 22 each.

On September 24, 1940 an article appeared in the Newark Evening News headlined, "Pennington Court Sets Good Neighbor Policy." (Copy attached). Reporter Harry Gilroy wrote about how life was going in Newark's first low rent apartment development. Mr. Gilroy interviewed Manager Ellsworth J. Sweeney and visited all areas of Pennington Court. Among the many points included in the article were:

"Most of the lawn and shrub areas, the hallways and the center play space were neat."

"There appeared to be a general cleanliness about the apartment residents, particularly the women and small children, that was noticeably superior to what is usually seen in the city's tenement districts. Teachers at South Street School report they find pupils from Pennington Court spruced up beyond average for the district."

"There have been some fights between white and Negro children Sweeney says, but such kid fights are no different from fights between any two children, because our adults are showing enough wisdom to keep out of them."

"Sweeney received one complaint from several mothers. Their children have increased their food and milk consumption since moving into the more pleasant surroundings and getting a more protected place to play than they had in their old neighborhoods."

"He (Sweeney) said he knew one other circumstance that helped to answer how tenants were reacting to their new homes - there has never been a police officer looking for one of the tenants."

"We heard about how a tenant suffered a broken elbow recently and his neighbors ran a raffle to carry his family through the time he was out of work. He was a white man yet Negro residents of the USHA (United States Housing Authority) project raised \$60, even more than white residents raised."

In these early days tenant organizations included the Colored Men's Club of Pennington Court and the Pennington Court Men's Social Club (white). The two women's clubs were called the Pennington Court Girls' Club and the Mothers' Social Club (the Negro group).

In later years the first Tenants' Association in Newark's Public Housing was established in Pennington Court, 1954. The first president was Neil Riker, S. Elsie Reed Eatman is the current president.

OTHER FACTS

In June 1941 Pennington Court was selected by USHA as a demonstration center and model for outdoor cleanliness in garbage and refuse disposal. The Court served as a model for managers and others interested in public housing throughout the country "to come and see the best practice in operation."

Based on the third annual re-examination of tenant income, rents were increased for 190 of 236 families as a result of higher incomes in July 1943. The average rent before the increase was \$25.47 per month. After the July adjustment the average rent was \$35.31. In its first year the average rent in Pennington Court was \$21.05 per month.

Maximum rents in July 1943 were \$37 for three room apartments, \$42 for four rooms and \$47 for five rooms.

A ten-cent fee to unlock apartment doors for tenants who accidentally locked themselves out was introduced in December 1940. This charge reduced the requests from a dozen each day to about six a week.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTORS, NEWARK HOUSING AUTHORITY

1938 - 1960

Neil J. Convery, 1938 - 1942

Frank B. Weinrich, 1942 - 1946

Carl A. Baccaro, 1946 - 1948

Louis Danzig, 1948 - 1969

MANAGERS, PENNINGTON COURT

1939 - 1960

Ellsworth Sweeney

Louis Danzig

Irving Laskowitz

Allen Rizzolo

Silas Hogan

SPECIAL MEMORIES

Pennington Court Eagles' Softball Team

Saturday Night Lawn Dances

Jones Hot Music

The Recreation Hall

Mount Zion Baptist Church

Reverend J. H. Burks

Move to Broadway

The Temple - The Smiths

Lincoln Park

Parades on Broad Street

Fourth of July at Weequahic Park

Horse Races and Fireworks

Rialto Theatre

The Grocery Stores

Jaskot's

A & P

Rispoli's

Annie Boys'

Live Chicken Market

Father Divine

Ration Books

Pennington Street Horse Stables

Salvation Army

Pacific Street Candy Stores - Joe's and Greta's

Peter Paul's Italian Hotdogs

Pacific Street Dry Goods Stores

South Street Drugstore - "Doc"

National Lock Washer

C. B. Christiansen's

Four Plating

SPECIAL MEMORIES - CONTINUED

Mr. Frazier's Barber Shop

Myrtle Simmons' Beauty Parlor

Jimmy's Cleaners

Kuperman's Cleaners

Wagner's Pie Factory

Grimsley's Tavern

Hymie's Bar

Aaron's Liquor Store

The Schools

South Street

Oliver Street

East Side High

Radio Stories

Jim Moody's First Saxophone

No. 3 Bergen Bus

No. 25 Springfield - South Street

Five Cent Bus Fare

Newark Airport

Bear/Ruppert Stadium

The Newark Eagles

Arrival of the Circus at the Trainyard

The Early Morning Trips

SEP 24 1940

Pennington Court Sets Good Neighbor Policy

USHA Apartment Tenants Working Out Social, Racial and Housekeeping Problems

By HARRY SILVER

We dropped in at Pennington Court the other day to see how life was going in Newark's first low rent apartment.

Right off we heard about how a tenant suffered a broken elbow recently and his neighbors ran a raffle to carry his family through the time he was out of work. He was a white man, yet Negro residents of the USHA project raised \$60, even more than white residents raised.

Our authority is Ellsworth J. Sweeney, manager of the Newark Housing Authority's initial project, which has been open since March. It was his reply to our question of how the 246 families taken from substandard dwellings all over the city were getting along in their new home.

Who Makes Slums?

A considerable number of Newarkers have shown their interest in that question, Sweeney says, by visiting the development; most visitors have been in club groups. Some apparently expected support for a theory that people who had formerly lived in slums would make a new slum of any apartments, however desirable.

The appearance of public facilities in the development, which are in the tenants' care, seemed to refute that. Most of the lawn and shrub areas, the hallways and the center play space were neat. There were some weed patches and some bits of paper strewn around, but by comparison with public areas of most Newark tenements the place was exceedingly well kept.

There appeared to be a general cleanliness about the apartment residents, particularly the women and small children, that was noticeably superior to what is usually seen in the city's tenement districts. Teachers at South Street School report they find pupils from Pennington Court spruced up beyond average for the district.

400 Children

Sweeney says there are some untidy housekeepers among the tenants, but even the worst show a disposition to improve. The problem of keeping the center play and lawn areas neat is naturally difficult, because they are used by 600 adults and 400 children of Pennington Court—and people from the neighborhood who are so inclined. On the whole, he says, the tenants are doing a good job of keeping up their homes and neighborhood.

In national extraction, the residents include 117 Italian adults, 33 Irish, 26 Hebrew, 22 Polish, 22 German, 9 Slovak, 8 Lithuanian, 7 French, 7 Hungarian, 6 English, 5 Russian and 5 Scotch. There are 346 adults born in the United States, 152 of them in Newark.

Negro families occupy one of the four buildings. There have been some fights between white and Negro children, Sweeney says, "but such kid fights are no different from fights between any two children, because our adults are showing enough wisdom to keep out of them." A white mother, and a Negro mother did get involved in one children's dispute, but it was settled by an exchange of apologies in Sweeney's office.

Two Men's Clubs

The Colored Men's Club of Pennington Court and the Pennington Court Men's Social Club, which is white, have played a series of softball games on a neighborhood lot. It was at one of their games that the man for whom the raffle was held broke his elbow.

These men's clubs and the two women's clubs, called the Pennington Court Girls' Club and the Mothers' Social Club (the Negro group), are showing an increasing interest in problems like taking care of the grounds. When the Mothers' Social Club held a "lawn dance" in August, white tenants attended as well as the Negro ones.

The two men's clubs have been given basement incinerator rooms for club space. The white men's club is being painted by the members at present. The Colored Men's Club has painted its floor gray, furnished the room with seats for 20, put in a radio and a table with checker squares painted on the wood, covered up the incinerator outlet with pictures from movie theater street displays and put photographs of two men on the wall in the place of honor. They are Joe Louis and Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Better Service

A notice on a wall board of the club announces that the "Pennington Court Jr. Association Club" will give a dance October 11, admission 20 cents for adults, to raise funds for uniforms of a Boy Scout troop which the Negro boys are forming. Frankfurters and punch will be served. Another notice on the club's board is "No Profanity." Sweeney reports he has found the tenants "co-operative in their dealings with my office." They reported such things as stuffed-up sinks promptly after coming to understand that the apartment mechanic will repair them, which is much better service than many of the tenants got in their previous homes.

At the end of this month the first family to move from the apartment because of an increase in income

will depart. The man of the family volunteered his pay had risen so that he was no longer within the low-income group for which the

apartment was built. Tenancy is restricted to families making not more than \$18.46 a week for two persons and up to \$24.04 for a family of seven. Rents are \$20.50 to \$21.75 a month with heat, gas, electricity and hot water.

Baby Clinic

The Baby-Keep-Well station of the Board of Health has been moved from Oliver Street School to a corner of the development, where it gives service to the 26 babies born in Pennington Court as well as other infants of the district. Sweeney would like to see the Board of Education run a home economics course at Pennington Court to improve the housekeeping of some of the less careful women of the apartment and of the neighborhood.

School authorities have already done two things for the apartment, stationed a recreational supervisor in the playground for some of the Summer period and recently opened South Street School to children over 4. About 400 children played regularly in the center area during the

The apartment charges \$1 a month for parking of automobiles by tenants in two parking courts of the development. There are 34 cars using the space and none of them looks to be better than the sort of utilitarian vehicle that might be expected to go with their owners' income.

Sweeney has received one complaint from several mothers. Their children have increased their food

and milk consumption since moving into the more pleasant surroundings and getting a more protected place to play than they had in their old neighborhoods. He said he knew one other circumstance that helped to answer how the tenants were reacting to their new homes—there has never been a police officer at the apartments "looking for" one of the tenants.

"Credit men have come looking for some of our tenants; I must admit," Sweeney said, "but then that happens in some of the better homes, too."

July 29, 1982

Dear Neighbor,

You and your family are cordially invited to attend a Pennington Court Reunion to be held

Sunday, October 10 , 1982

Scott's Manor, 180 Main Street, Orange, N.J.

3 P.M. - 7 P.M. (Buffet dinner served 4-6 P.M.)

Adults - \$15.00 Children under 10 years old - \$7.50

Cash Bar - available

We are trying to reach as many residents and families who lived in the Court during the early years, 1940 - 1960. Please share all of this information with members of your family and other contacts. The more we talk up the Reunion with the "old-timers", the more people we can reach to attend.

To make reservations, please complete the enclosed form and return with your check or money order no later than September 18, 1982. All reservations must be made in advance. Absolutely no monies will be accepted at the door.

Further, if you have any pictures or mementoes of Pennington Court in these early years please contact a member of the Committee. We would like to have an exhibit on display.

Your questions can be directed to any member of the Planning Committee. We are counting on you to attend and to tell others about the Pennington Court Reunion. A good time will be had by all.

Sincerely,

Gloria Simmons Kingston, 674-8796
Elsie Reed Eatman, 589-2788
John Caldwell, 824-4734
Hayes Cooper, 676-7251

Ed Seagraves, 373-8365
Leroy Minatee, 923-8550
Walt Chambers, 678-6311

Attachment

PENNINGTON COURT REUNION

Please make the following reservations:

<u>Number of Tickets</u>		<u>Amount</u>
_____ Adults - @ \$ 15.00	per person =	_____
_____ Children @ \$ 7.50	per person =	_____
Total Tickets _____	Total Amount	\$ _____

Send tickets to: _____
(Name)_____
(Street)_____
(City) (State) (Zip Code)Please make all checks/money orders payable to Pennington Court Reunion and mail before September 18, 1982 to:

Ms. Gloria Kingston
 276 Prospect Street
 Apt. 6C
 East Orange, N.J. 07017

LIST OF ATTENDEES (Use back if needed)

NameAddress

Dear Neighbor,

Here is your order of _____ ticket(s) for the Pennington Court Reunion set for Sunday, October 10, 1982, 3-7 P.M. at Scott's Manor, 180 Main Street, Orange.

We are pleased that you will attend. The response has been great so you will see many old neighbors and friends from the Court. Come early and enjoy a full afternoon.

Please fill out the ticket stub with your name and address and bring it with you. It will be used to award door prizes.

Look forward to seeing you on October 10.

Sincerely,

The Pennington Court
Reunion Committee

Enclosure